

OMEGA-3 Fatty Acids

You may have heard about the benefits of eating foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids. But what does that really mean? Understanding the benefits of omega-3 fatty acids – and learning how to identify them – will help you incorporate a healthy amount of these fats into your meal plan.

What are omega-3 fatty acids?

Omega-3 fatty acids are an important type of polyunsaturated fat. Three types of omega-3 fatty acids are found in foods and used by the body:

- DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) found in fish and shellfish
- EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) found in fish and shellfish
- ALA (alpha-linolenic acid) found in plant sources.



EPA and DHA are both associated with heart health. The body converts ALA to the fatty acids EPA and DHA, but in smaller amounts and at a much slower rate.

What are the benefits of a diet rich in omega-3s?

Evidence suggests that omega-3 fatty acids – in the form of DHA and EPA – help maintain a healthy heart and may help reduce the risk of coronary heart disease.

In addition, these heart-healthy fats are needed for proper brain growth and development in infants. (DHA foods are especially important during pregnancy and breastfeeding.)

More research is necessary, but emerging studies indicate that omega-3s may help reduce the risk of certain diseases.

How many omega-3s do I need to eat?

Generally, it's recommended that most people eat at least 2 servings of fish, especially fatty fish, per week (a serving is 3 to 4 ounces). For individuals who cannot meet this recommendation through foods, or in other specific cases, it may be appropriate for a health care provider to recommend a fish oil supplement.

Fortified foods

You may notice information about omega-3 fatty acids on food labels, as more food companies are adding omega-3s to their products. Some of these foods include: specific brands of eggs, peanut butter, buttery spreads, popcorn, and mayonnaise. Read nutrition labels carefully. Many fortified products contain very little omega-3 fatty acid, and some may contain ALA, which your body cannot use as efficiently as the marine types, EPA and DHA.

Each day, look for several ways to increase all three types of omega-3 fatty acids. If you think you're not eating enough, make an appointment with a registered dietitian to help you find creative ways to meet your needs and improve your wellbeing.

For delicious ways to increase omega-3 fatty acids in your day, simply:

- Add chopped walnuts and grilled or baked salmon to a salad
- Select or prepare your favorite seafood on the grill or in the oven
- Substitute fish in one of your favorite chicken dishes
- Try a small handful of walnuts as a snack
- Sprinkle ground flaxseed on your cereal, yogurt, or salad
- Prepare a tuna fish sandwich for lunch
- Spread a trans-fat free margarine with added omega-3 on whole wheat toast



** Information courtesy of Diabetes Care and Education, a dietetic practice group of the American Dietetic Association **



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